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ABSTRACT

This paper is designed to provide school social workers with a conceptual framework that will help guide their participation in state and local level planning for implementing functional behavioral assessments (FBAs) and behavioral intervention plans (BIPs) for students which school personnel propose to suspend for more than 10 days in any school year. The paper begins by identifying the following guiding principles for the implementation of FBAs and BIPs: (1) behavior should be assessed systemically; (2) the term functional modifies the terms behavior and assessment; (3) BIPs should emphasize the use of positives, inclusive, and least instructive approaches; (4) for students requiring special education, functional assessment of the need for social, emotional, and behavioral supports should be conducted across all aspects of programming, including initial identification, initial Individualized Education Program (IEP) development and implementation, ongoing review and revision of the IEP, and at the time when students' behavior prompts disciplinary action; (5) parents should be actively encouraged to participate; and (6) the implementation of FBAs and BIPs is not intended to rely on the use of a single theoretical framework or on the expertise of any one profession. The paper then identifies essential elements of FBAs and BIPs. (CR)

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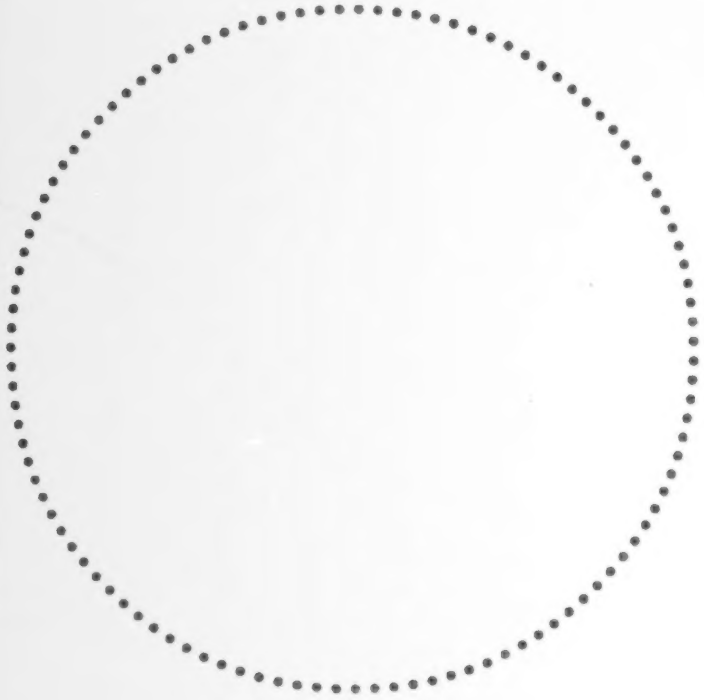
Functional Behavioral Assessment and Behavioral Intervention Plans: Implementing the Student Discipline Provisions of IDEA '97

A Technical Assistance Guide for School Social Workers
May 1998



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Introduction and Purpose

The recently reauthorized Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA '97) and its proposed regulations include new requirements that must be addressed when the behavior of a student requiring special education services prompts disciplinary action. These new requirements represent the intent of Congress to broaden the alternatives available to school personnel to deal with disruptive student behavior and to balance these responses with procedural safeguards that are viewed as essential to ensure that students who require special education continue to receive a free, appropriate, public education.

These procedural safeguards include the requirement that Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams conduct a *functional behavioral assessment* and develop a *behavioral intervention plan* for students that school personnel propose to suspend for more than 10 days in any school year. So what exactly is a *functional behavioral assessment* and a *behavioral intervention plan?* These terms are not defined in the new Federal law or in proposed Federal regulations, and it is not expected that they will be defined when the proposed Federal regulations are finalized.

In the absence of greater specificity in Federal regulations, states will be making important decisions regarding how they will implement these new requirements. Some states may elect to rewrite state regulations to include state developed definitions, specific content requirements, or procedures that prescribe what must be included in functional behavioral assessments and behavioral intervention plans. Other states may take a non-regulatory approach by providing such definitions, content requirements, and procedures in the form of practice guidelines, technical assistance materials, and training. It is critical that school social workers advocate for representation in state and local level deliberations, be prepared to actively participate in the decision-making process, and facilitate successful implementation of these provisions.

The purpose of this paper is to provide school social workers with a conceptual framework that will help guide their participation in state and local level discussions and planning for how these new requirements will be operationalized. Toward this end, the paper will 1) identify assumptions underlying the implementation of these requirements, 2) propose definitions for functional behavioral assessment and behavioral intervention plans, and 3) identify essential elements of functional behavioral assessment and behavioral intervention plans.

Guiding Principles for the Implementation of Functional Behavioral Assessment and Behavioral Intervention Plans

School social workers should consider the following principles when participating in planning to implement the IDEA provisions for Functional Behavioral Assessments and Behavioral Intervention Plans.

1. Behavior should be assessed systemically. Assessment should take an ecological approach, focusing not only on the student, but on the student in interaction with his or her environment in school, home and community settings.

2. The term "functional" modifies the terms "behavior" and "assessment." Assessment should seek to understand and describe the function that particular behaviors serve for the student, and the assessment should be functional in that it generates information that leads readily to the development of interventions.

3. Behavioral Intervention Plans should emphasize the use of positive, inclusive, and least intrusive approaches to changing behavior. Behavior change efforts should emphasize the use of positive behavioral intervention strategies that seek to support adaptive and prosocial behavior, and build on the strengths of students and their families. The use of punishment and exclusion should be avoided, as well as unnecessarily intrusive assessment and interventions.

4. For students requiring special education, functional assessment of the need for social, emotional and behavioral supports should be conducted across all aspects of programming, including initial identification, initial IEP development and implementation, ongoing review and revision of the IEP, and at the time when students' behavior prompts disciplinary action. Providing appropriate programming for any student requiring special education includes addressing the need for social, emotional and behavioral supports and is the ongoing responsibility of the IEP team. Such supports should address barriers to learning and facilitate the student's maximum benefit from his or her educational experience. In most cases, functional assessment of behavior and the development of IEP goals and objectives directed at changing behavior should have occurred long before the student's behavior has prompted 10 days of suspension.

5. Parents should be actively supported and encouraged to participate in planning and conducting Functional Behavioral Assessments and Behavioral Intervention Plans. As members of the IEP team, parents should be recognized as experts who have unequaled knowledge of and experience with their child. They are a rich source of assessment information and are critical supporters of intervention plans for changing student behavior.

6. The implementation of Functional Behavioral Assessments and Behavioral Intervention Plans is not intended to rely on the use of a single theoretical framework. There are a variety of theoretical frameworks; e.g., social learning, systems theory, solution focused theory, that can be used to understand the function or purpose of a student's behavior. The use of the term "behavioral" is not intended to prescribe the use of behavioral theory in assessment and intervention practices; rather, the term is intended to refer generally to assessment that focuses on behavior and intervention plans that are directed at changing behavior.

7. The implementation of Functional Behavioral Assessments and Behavioral Intervention Plans is not intended to rely on the expertise of any one profession. The IEP team has responsibility for conducting Functional Behavioral Assessments and developing Behavioral Intervention Plans. Though the proposed IDEA '97 regulations explicitly identify "assisting in developing positive behavioral intervention strategies" in the definitions for psychological services and social work services in schools, for any particular student and behavior(s) of concern the relevant expertise for conducting the Functional Behavioral Assessment and development of the Behavioral Intervention Plan may come from various members of the IEP team; e.g., school social worker, school psychologist, special education teacher, general education teacher, school counselor, school nurse, special education instructional consultant, etc.

Functional Behavioral Assessment Defined

Functional behavioral assessment can be generally defined as assessment that enhances understanding of the purpose and effect of the behavior(s) of concern, and which provides information that is useful in the development of a student's IEP. For students who become subject to disciplinary action, a functional behavioral assessment provides information that is useful in the development of a behavioral intervention plan within the context of the IEP process.

Functional Behavioral Assessment: Essential Elements

With this general definition in mind, the following essential elements or features of a functional behavioral assessment should be considered in the development of more specific procedures and content requirements.

Identification and Definition of Behavior(s) of Concern

•An objective, detailed, and behaviorally specific definition or description of the behavior(s) of concern is developed

•The definition includes a description of the frequency, duration, intensity, and severity of the behavior(s) of concern, and the setting(s) in which the behavior(s) occur

Data Collection

•The scope and comprehensiveness of data collection is tailored to the individual student and to the particular behavior(s) of concern

•Existing information is reviewed, particularly prior measurable and goal-directed attempts to address the behavior(s) of concern, and additional information is collected when needed

•Both qualitative and quantitative data are collected and considered

•Student strengths or areas of competence are identified

•Multiple methods of data collection are used, which may include student interviews, parent or family interviews, direct observation, behavior checklists, standardized behavioral assessment instruments, etc.

•Data collection procedures are valid and reliable

•Information is collected and considered in a culturally competent manner

•Information is collected from multiple settings; i.e. school, home, and community

•Diagnostic/descriptive information is collected, when relevant, through collaboration with professionals/agencies external to the school

Analysis

•Multiple sources of relevant information are considered, including:

- •the setting(s) in which the behavior(s) occur
- •the specific behavior(s) of the student
- •student traits, including personal/affective characteristics

•Analysis focuses on:

- •understanding the purpose and function of the behavior(s) of concern
- •factors/conditions precipitating the behavior(s) of concern
- •the individual's social, emotional and behavioral functioning in relationship to expectations

•the development of interventions
•the identification of needed supports
•the identification of desired behavior(s) that could serve as a functional alternative

Behavioral Intervention Plan Defined

A behavioral intervention plan can be generally defined as a written, specific, purposeful and organized plan which describes positive behavioral interventions and other strategies that will be implemented to address goals for a student's social, emotional and behavioral development within the context of the IEP process. In addition, for students whose behavior prompts disciplinary action by the school, the behavioral intervention plan addresses the behavior(s) of concern that led to conducting a functional behavioral assessment.

Behavioral Intervention Plan: Essential Elements

With this general definition in mind, the following essential elements or features of behavioral intervention plans should be considered in the development of more specific procedures and content requirements.

Intervention Planning and Implementation

•There is a clear link between the functional behavioral assessment data collected and the intervention(s) selected
•The intervention strategies are selected based on the nature of the defined problem, parent input, and professional knowledge and judgments about the potential effectiveness of strategies
•Measurable goals and objectives are written which clearly describe projected improvement or remediation of the problem
•The behavioral intervention plan includes a description of the strategies that will be used to increase positive behavior and decrease undesirable behavior, including planned disciplinary procedures, if necessary
•Strategies for generalizing and maintaining positive behavior outside of the training situation are included
•The behavioral intervention plan is implemented with integrity; i.e., interventions are actually implemented in the manner in which they were designed, and consistent with established professional standards and practices.

Monitoring of Intervention Effects

•Student performance data are collected and documented on a regular and frequent basis, as specified in the behavioral intervention plan

•Modification of the behavioral intervention plan is made as frequently as necessary, based on monitoring information

•Progress monitoring information is summarized and documented in a way that communicates to parents and relevant others whether the intervention is accomplishing its intended effect

•Progress monitoring information is used frequently and repeatedly to determine whether the anticipated outcomes for the individual are being met and whether the placement and services are appropriate to the individual's learning needs

Summary and Conclusions

Provisions for functional behavioral assessment and behavioral intervention plans in IDEA '97 represent nothing more than sound social work practice. These provisions are not essentially different from sound practices in developing IEPs for students with disabilities, including the consideration of such principles as providing services in the least restrictive environment; e.g., the assurance of access to the general education curriculum, offering a continuum of program options in order to provide special education in an individualized fashion, and basing the development of goals and objectives on the student's present level of educational performance.

Nevertheless, these terms and the concepts and practices they suggest are now included in Federal law and regulations for the first time and must be addressed by states and by school social workers as members of IEP teams. The purpose of these provisions is to give greater emphasis to the student's need for social, emotional and behavioral supports in the IEP process, doing so on a par with programming for academic and other needs. These requirements are also intended to broaden the responses available to schools in dealing with dangerous behavior and to ensure that students who exhibit such behavior as a manifestation of their disability have access to procedural safeguards and programming that will ensure direct attention to these needs.

The explicit requirement in IDEA '97 to consider the need for "positive behavioral interventions" in the IEP process, along with the addition to the definition of social work services in schools which refers to "assisting in the development of positive behavioral interventions," provides an opportunity for school social workers, as mem-

bers of IEP teams, to contribute a strengths-based perspective in order to adequately support students who exhibit problematic behavior and to promote a partnership with parents and other relevant experts throughout the process. School social workers should approach the functional behavioral assessment process ecologically, thereby enriching the process by developing systemic interventions for students in need of significant social, emotional and behavioral supports.

In order to make these contributions, however, school social workers will need to create opportunities to actively participate in state and local planning initiatives. Such initiatives will define and shape policies and practices regarding functional behavioral assessment and behavioral intervention plans. It is hoped that the conceptual framework presented in this paper will assist school social workers as they participate in these efforts.

Note: The descriptions of essential elements and definitions of functional behavioral assessment and behavioral intervention plans presented in this paper are based on previous work developed by the Student Discipline Workgroup convened as a part of the Iowa Department of Education's IDEA '97 Implementation Plan and co-chaired by the author.